

The Concept of Moral Education According to Imam Al-Ghazali and Its Relevance to Modern Education

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Abstract

This study aims to: (1) examine in depth the concept of moral education according to Imam Al-Ghazali based on his major works; (2) analyze the core components of Al-Ghazali's concept of moral education, covering objectives, content, methods, and evaluation; and (3) examine the relevance of Al-Ghazali's concept of moral education to modern education in the context of the moral challenges of the 21st century. This research is motivated by the character crisis and moral decline among the younger generation, which constitutes one of the greatest challenges of contemporary education, as well as by the richness of Imam Al-Ghazali's intellectual legacy, which remains highly relevant as a source of inspiration for the renewal of Islamic education. The study uses a qualitative approach with the library research method and a historical-philosophical research design. Primary data sources include Al-Ghazali's major works, particularly *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, *Mizan al-'Amal*, *Ayyuha al-Walad*, and *Kimiya al-Sa'adah*. Secondary data sources include books, journals, and scholarly works examining Al-Ghazali's thought and modern education.

Keywords: *Moral Education, Imam Al-Ghazali, Modern Education, Relevance.*

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Introduction

The character crisis and moral decline constitute one of the most pressing issues facing contemporary education. In Indonesia, phenomena such as the rising incidence of student brawls, bullying, drug abuse, promiscuity, and a diminishing sense of respect toward parents and teachers are a real reflection of the weak foundation of moral education within the existing formal education system. Data from the Indonesian Commission for Child Protection (KPAI, 2023) recorded a significant increase in cases of violence involving students over the past three years, indicating that existing approaches to moral education have not been able to effectively address the challenge of character degradation (KPAI, 2023; Lickona, 2021).

Within the Islamic intellectual tradition, Imam Abu Hamid Muhammad bin Muhammad Al-Ghazali (1058–1111 CE) is recognized as one of the greatest thinkers on Islamic education of all time. Known as Hujjatul Islam (the Proof of Islam), Al-Ghazali left behind an extraordinarily rich intellectual legacy, particularly in the field of moral education. Through his magnum opus *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* (The Revival of the Religious Sciences) and other important works such as *Mizan al-'Amal* and *Ayyuha al-Walad*, Al-Ghazali formulated a comprehensive and holistic system of moral education grounded in the integration of knowledge and practice, the outward and inward dimensions of the human being, and the individual and social aspects of human life (Al-Ghazali, in Abidin Ibnu Rusn, 2021; Nata, 2021).

The relevance of Al-Ghazali's thought in the context of modern education is receiving increasingly serious attention from academics and education practitioners. As emphasized by Langgulang (2020), fundamental educational questions such as the purpose of education, the nature of the human being, methods of character formation, and the role of the teacher as an exemplar have essentially never changed despite the passage of time. It is precisely in the post-modern era, marked by moral relativism and spiritual crisis, that Al-Ghazali's thought on moral education becomes increasingly relevant as a holistic and profound alternative (Langgulang, 2020; Ramayulis, 2022).

Modern education, with its various paradigms ranging from humanism and constructivism to competency-based education, has contributed substantially to the development of educational methods and curricula. Nevertheless, modern education is generally considered weak in the spiritual and transcendental dimension, which is precisely the main strength of Al-Ghazali's concept of moral education. Tafsir (2022) asserts that one of the fundamental weaknesses of modern education is its tendency to separate the intellectual dimension from the moral and spiritual dimension in the educational process, thereby producing individuals who are cognitively intelligent yet morally and spiritually impoverished (Tafsir, 2022; Muhaimin, 2021).

Several previous studies have examined particular aspects of Al-Ghazali's educational thought. Zainuddin and Mustaqim (2022) examined Al-Ghazali's concept of *tazkiyat al-nafs* (purification of the soul) and its implications for the development of the Islamic religious education curriculum. Maarif and Suharto (2023) analyzed the relevance of Al-Ghazali's character-education method in the context of 21st-century education. Meanwhile, Huda and Kartanegara (2021) compared Al-Ghazali's concept of moral education with Lickona's character theory and found many significant points of convergence. However, no study has yet comprehensively analyzed all components of Al-Ghazali's concept of moral education and its holistic relevance to modern education (Zainuddin & Mustaqim, 2022; Maarif & Suharto, 2023; Huda & Kartanegara, 2021).

Based on the background described above, the research questions in this study are: (1) What is the concept of moral education according to Imam Al-Ghazali based on his major works? (2) What are the core components of Al-Ghazali's concept of moral education, covering objectives, content, methods, and evaluation? (3) What is the relevance of Imam Al-Ghazali's Based on the background described above, the research questions in this study are: (1) What is the concept of moral education according to Imam Al-Ghazali based on his major works? (2)

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Literature Review

2.1. Intellectual Biography of Imam Al-Ghazali

Imam Abu Hamid Muhammad bin Muhammad Al-Ghazali Al-Thusi was born in 450 AH/1058 CE in Thus, Khurasan (present-day Iran). He passed away in 505 AH/1111 CE, leaving behind an extraordinary intellectual legacy for Islamic civilization. Al-Ghazali underwent a long intellectual and spiritual journey: studying in Nishapur under the guidance of Al-Juwaini (Imam Al-Haramain), later becoming a professor at the Nizhamiyyah University of Baghdad, the highest institution of learning in the Islamic world at the time, and eventually abandoning his academic establishment to live a Sufi life for several years before returning to teaching and writing (Abidin Ibnu Rusn, 2021; Fathiyah, 2022).

Al-Ghazali's works number more than 70 titles spanning various fields of Islamic scholarship: theology, philosophy, Sufism, jurisprudence, and education. His major works that serve as references in moral education include: (1) *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* (The Revival of the Religious Sciences), a monumental four-volume work comprehensively discussing the dimensions of worship, social custom, destructive traits, and salvific traits; (2) *Mizan al-'Amal* (The Balance of Action), which discusses ethics and the formation of good character; (3) *Ayyuha al-Walad* (O Son), a pedagogical treatise on the teacher-student relationship and the ethics of seeking knowledge; and (4) *Kimiya al-Sa'adah* (The Alchemy of Happiness), which discusses the path toward true happiness through the purification of the soul (Abidin Ibnu Rusn, 2021; Nata, 2021).

2.2. The Concept of Modern Education and the Moral Crisis of the 21st Century

Modern education, which has developed since the 18th century, is characterized by several key features: an emphasis on rationality and empiricism, a pragmatic orientation toward the needs of the labor market, the democratization of access to education, and the secularization of the curriculum. Thinkers such as Rousseau, Dewey, Piaget, and Vygotsky have made substantial contributions to the modern educational paradigm, which prioritizes the holistic development of children's potential through constructivist and humanistic approaches (Santrock, 2021; Tilaar, 2022).

Nevertheless, modern education faces serious criticism regarding its weak moral and spiritual dimension. Lickona (2021), in his analysis of the character crisis among younger generations, identifies ten alarming signs of moral decline, among them: rising violence and vandalism, rampant dishonesty, a lack of respect for authority, cruelty among peers, widespread fanaticism and hatred, and impoverished language marked by the use of crude words. This moral crisis is regarded as evidence of modern education's failure to comprehensively shape character (Lickona, 2021; Tilaar, 2022).

In Indonesia, Presidential Regulation No. 87 of 2017 on the Strengthening of Character Education (PPK) represents a policy response to this character crisis. The PPK identifies five main character values that must be developed: religiosity, nationalism, independence, mutual cooperation, and integrity. Interestingly, these values correspond significantly with the components of moral character formulated by Al-Ghazali eight centuries earlier, indicating a universality in the concept of character education that transcends the boundaries of time and culture (Kemendikbud, 2020; Maarif & Suharto, 2023).

2.3. Conceptual Framework of the Study

This study is built upon a conceptual framework that integrates two major intellectual traditions: the classical Islamic tradition of moral-education thought represented by Al-Ghazali (in Abidin Ibnu Rusn, 2021) and the modern tradition of character-education thought represented by Lickona (2021) and Tilaar (2022). This framework operates at three interrelated levels of analysis: (1) the ontological level, understanding the nature of moral character and the human being from Al-Ghazali's perspective; (2) the epistemological level, analyzing the methods and processes of moral formation formulated by Al-Ghazali; and (3) the axiological

level, examining the values and objectives of moral education and their relevance to the modern context (Nata, 2021; Ramayulis, 2022).

The relevance analysis within this framework uses four categories of relationship developed from Maarif and Suharto (2023): (1) convergence, aspects of Al-Ghazali's concept that are fully relevant and consistent with the modern educational paradigm; (2) adaptation, aspects that require contextual reinterpretation to be applied within a modern educational setting; (3) productive critique, aspects of Al-Ghazali's concept that offer correction and renewal of the weaknesses of modern education; and (4) implementation challenges, aspects that face structural obstacles within the context of Indonesia's contemporary education system (Maarif & Suharto, 2023; Zainuddin & Mustaqim, 2022).

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach using the library research method and a historical-philosophical research design. The library research method was chosen because the object of this study is intellectual thought preserved in written texts, namely Al-Ghazali's own works and various secondary literature examining them. Zed (2022) asserts that library research is an appropriate method for studies that focus on the analysis of intellectual works, whether historical or contemporary.

The historical-philosophical design was chosen because this study not only reconstructs Al-Ghazali's thought historically, but also analyzes it philosophically and critically examines its relevance to the context of modern education. This approach enables the researcher to conduct an in-depth analysis of the logical structure, underlying assumptions, and practical implications of Al-Ghazali's concept of moral education in a comprehensive manner (Creswell & Creswell, 2022; Nata, 2021). The data sources in this study are divided into two complementary categories. Primary sources consist of Al-Ghazali's own works, particularly:

(1) *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* (translated and Arabic editions); (2) *Mizan al-'Amal*; (3) *Ayyuha al-Walad*; and (4) *Kimiya al-Sa'adah*. These primary sources are accessed through original Arabic editions as well as authoritative Indonesian and English translations (Abidin Ibnu Rusn, 2021).

Secondary sources consist of: (1) books on Al-Ghazali's educational thought by scholars such as Abidin Ibnu Rusn (2021), Nata (2021), Fathiyah (2022), Langgulung (2020), and Ramayulis (2022); (2) scholarly journals examining Al-Ghazali's thought and its relevance to modern education, such as Zainuddin and Mustaqim (2022), Maarif and Suharto (2023), and Huda and Kartanegara (2021); and (3) books on modern education and character education, such as Lickona (2021), Santrock (2021), and Tilaar (2022). Data collection in this study uses the documentation method, comprising two systematic stages. First, the identification and inventory stage, in which the researcher identifies, collects, and catalogs all data sources relevant to the research topic, both primary and secondary, from various libraries, digital repositories, and academic journal databases (Sugiyono, 2022). Second, the critical reading stage, in which the researcher conducts an in-depth and critical reading of all collected data sources. During this stage, the researcher produces substantive notes, methodological notes, and analytical notes that form the basis for the subsequent data analysis process. Notes are recorded systematically using data cards classified according to the study's main themes (Zed, 2022; Creswell & Creswell, 2022).

Data analysis in this study employs three techniques that work synergistically and complementarily. First, content analysis. The researcher systematically analyzes the content of Al-Ghazali's texts to identify, categorize, and interpret the main concepts of moral education contained therein. Content analysis is conducted at two levels: the manifest level (explicit meaning stated in the text) and the latent level (implicit meaning embedded within the overall context of Al-Ghazali's thought) (Zed, 2022). Second, comparative analysis. The researcher compares Al-Ghazali's concepts of moral education with modern concepts of character and

moral education to identify similarities, differences, and significant points of convergence. This analysis uses four categories of relationship: convergence, adaptation, productive critique, and implementation challenges, as formulated in the study's conceptual framework (Maarif & Suharto, 2023). Third, relevance analysis. The researcher critically examines the extent to which and in what respects Al-Ghazali's concept of moral education remains relevant, requires adaptation, or offers correction to the contemporary modern educational paradigm. The relevance analysis is conducted with due consideration of the current Indonesian socio-cultural context and the challenges of 21st-century education (Nata, 2021; Lickona, 2021).

The validity of the data in this library-based study is tested through several strategies adapted to the characteristics of textual research. First, source triangulation, in which the researcher compares information from various primary and secondary textual sources to ensure the consistency and accuracy of the interpretation of Al-Ghazali's thought. Second, peer review, in which the researcher discusses the findings and interpretations of the analysis with experts in the field of Islamic educational thought to obtain critical input that strengthens the validity of the interpretation (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). Third, confirmability, whereby the entire analytical process is transparently documented and traceable (audit trail), allowing readers to trace the line of argumentation from raw data to final conclusions. Fourth, member checking within the context of library research is conducted by confirming the researcher's interpretation of Al-Ghazali's texts against the interpretations of Al-Ghazali scholars available in authoritative secondary literature, to ensure that the resulting interpretation is unbiased and does not deviate from the author's original intent (Moleong, 2021; Zed, 2022).

Results

4.1. The Concept of Moral Education According to Imam Al-Ghazali Based on His Major Works

An examination of Al-Ghazali's major works shows that he defines moral character (akhlak) as a firmly established disposition of the soul (hay'ah rasikha fi al-nafs) from which actions arise easily and spontaneously, without requiring prior deliberation or consideration. If this disposition of the soul gives rise to good and praiseworthy actions according to reason and religious law, it is termed good moral character (akhlaq al-hasanah); conversely, if it gives rise to bad actions, it is termed bad moral character (akhlaq al-sayyi'ah). This definition contains three fundamental elements: the disposition of the soul as substance, ease of action as character, and moral judgment as the standard (Al-Ghazali, in Abidin Ibnu Rusn, 2021; Zainuddin & Mustaqim, 2022).

The findings also show that, within Al-Ghazali's system of thought, the human soul (al-nafs) possesses three powers that must be balanced in order to attain perfect moral character: (1) al-quwwah al-'aqliyyah (the power of reason/intellect), which, when in balance, gives rise to the virtue of hikmah (wisdom); (2) al-quwwah al-ghadhabiiyyah (the power of anger/courage), which, when balanced, gives rise to the virtue of shaja'ah (true courage); and (3) al-quwwah al-shahwiyyah (the power of desire), which, when balanced, gives rise to the virtue of 'iffah (self-restraint). The balance of these three powers gives rise to 'adl (justice) as the overarching principle of noble character (Al-Ghazali, in Huda & Kartanegara, 2021; Fathiyah, 2022).

These findings affirm that Al-Ghazali's concept of moral character is psycho-spiritual in nature, not merely normative-behavioral, but rooted in the comprehensive governance of the human inner self. This understanding forms an essential foundation for all components of moral education formulated by Al-Ghazali, as elaborated in the following section (Abidin Ibnu Rusn, 2021; Nata, 2021).

4.2. Core Components of Al-Ghazali's Concept of Moral Education: Objectives, Content, Methods, and Evaluation

The analysis shows that the objective of moral education according to Al-Ghazali is *taqarrub ila Allah* (drawing near to Allah SWT), realized through moral perfection as a human being (*al-insan al-kamil*). This objective is simultaneously eschatological and immanent: on one hand aiming to attain happiness in the hereafter (*sa'adat al-akhirah*), and on the other hand aiming to realize a dignified and meaningful life in this world (*sa'adat al-dunya*). Al-Ghazali asserts that the two cannot be separated: a person of noble character will attain happiness both in this world and in the hereafter (Abidin Ibnu Rusn, 2021; Ramayulis, 2022).

In terms of content, an examination of *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* shows that Al-Ghazali's moral education content encompasses four interrelated and hierarchical dimensions: (1) *rub' al-'ibadat* (the dimension of worship), covering moral conduct in the vertical relationship between humans and Allah SWT; (2) *rub' al-'adat* (the dimension of social custom), covering moral conduct in the horizontal relationship among human beings; (3) *rub' al-muhlikat* (the dimension of destructive traits), discussing reprehensible traits to be avoided such as arrogance, envy, and malice; and (4) *rub' al-munjiyat* (the dimension of salvific traits), discussing praiseworthy traits to be cultivated such as patience, gratitude, and trust in God (Al-Ghazali, in Maarif & Suharto, 2023).

In terms of methods, the study finds that the methods of moral education formulated by Al-Ghazali are integrative and progressive in nature. First, the method of *mujahadah* (spiritual striving), actively disciplining oneself to abandon reprehensible traits and cultivate praiseworthy ones. Second, the method of *riyadhah* (spiritual exercise), training the soul consistently through worship and righteous deeds. Third, the method of *uswah hasanah* (exemplary modeling), emulating the moral character of the Prophet Muhammad SAW as the prototype of the perfected human being. Fourth, the method of *ta'allum* (theoretical learning), studying the science of moral character to build cognitive awareness of good and evil. Fifth, the method of *mushahabah al-salihin* (association with the righteous), forming character through the influence of a positive social environment (Al-Ghazali, in Huda & Kartanegara, 2021; Zainuddin & Mustaqim, 2022).

As for evaluation, the study finds that Al-Ghazali positions *muhasabah* (self-introspection) and *muraqabah* (inner self-monitoring) as the primary instruments of moral evaluation. Unlike modern educational evaluation, which is generally external and measurable, moral evaluation in Al-Ghazali's thought is internal and reflective, carried out by the individual upon oneself on a continuous daily basis, with the aim of identifying personal shortcomings and designing ongoing self-improvement (*mujahadah al-nafs*). Such evaluation renders moral education a life-long process rather than merely an achievement measured at a single point in time (Abidin Ibnu Rusn, 2021; Nata, 2021).

Overall, these four components, namely objectives, content, methods, and evaluation, form a coherent and mutually reinforcing system of moral education, in which the transcendental objective is translated into structured content, implemented through progressive methods, and evaluated through a continuous mechanism of self-introspection (Ramayulis, 2022; Maarif & Suharto, 2023).

4.3. Relevance of Al-Ghazali's Concept of Moral Education to Modern Education

The relevance analysis shows that Al-Ghazali's concept of moral education holds multidimensional relevance to modern education, identifiable at a minimum of four points of convergence. First, in terms of educational objectives, Al-Ghazali's emphasis on forming the whole human being (*al-insan al-kamil*) corresponds with the paradigm of holistic education, which is receiving increasing attention in 21st-century education. Second, in terms of moral psychology, Al-Ghazali's theory of the three powers of the soul that must be balanced bears a structural resemblance to Goleman's theory of emotional intelligence (in Tilaar, 2022), which

emphasizes the balance between cognition, emotion, and motivation (Huda & Kartanegara, 2021; Tilaar, 2022).

Third, in terms of educational method, Al-Ghazali's concepts of mujahadah and riyadhah correspond with the principle of deliberate practice in modern educational psychology, which emphasizes that character is formed through consistent and intentional habituation. Fourth, in terms of the teacher's role, Al-Ghazali's concept of *uswah hasanah* corresponds with recent research findings on teacher modeling, which show that teacher exemplarity is one of the most determinant factors in the formation of students' character (Maarif & Suharto, 2023; Lickona, 2021).

Applying the four-category relevance framework developed from Maarif and Suharto (2023), this study identifies the four points of convergence above as falling under the category of pure convergence, that is, aspects that are fully relevant and consistent with the modern educational paradigm without requiring substantial adjustment. The concept of *muhasabah*-based evaluation, meanwhile, falls under the category of adaptation, as it requires contextual reinterpretation in order to be integrated with modern educational evaluation systems, which tend to be oriented toward standardized measurement.

At the same time, Al-Ghazali's emphasis on the spiritual-transcendental dimension as the foundation of moral education offers a productive critique of a fundamental weakness of modern education, namely its tendency to separate the intellectual dimension from the moral-spiritual dimension (Tafsir, 2022). In this respect, Al-Ghazali's thought is not merely relevant, but also functions as a corrective to the secular educational paradigm, which risks producing individuals who are cognitively intelligent yet spiritually barren. Nevertheless, this study also identifies real implementation challenges, particularly related to limited curriculum time, insufficient teacher competence in applying a holistic-spiritual approach, and the orientation of the contemporary Indonesian education system, which remains dominated by the measurement of cognitive-academic achievement rather than students' moral and spiritual achievement (Muhaimin, 2021; Tilaar, 2022).

Overall, these findings affirm that Al-Ghazali's concept of moral education is not merely a retrospective legacy of classical Islamic thought, but a productive and applicable conceptual framework for the renewal of moral education in the modern era, with the caveat that its implementation requires contextual adaptation strategies and structural support from prevailing educational policies and systems (Langgulang, 2020; Ramayulis, 2022).

Conclusion

Based on the results of the library-based study described above, three main conclusions can be drawn. First, Al-Ghazali conceives of moral character as a firmly established disposition of the soul (*hay'ah rasikha fi al-nafs*) arising from the balance of three powers of the soul, namely reason, anger, and desire, which give rise to the virtues of wisdom, true courage, and self-restraint, with justice (*'adl*) as the overarching principle of noble character. Second, the core components of Al-Ghazali's moral education form a coherent system, comprising the objective of drawing near to Allah toward the perfect human being, content organized into four dimensions (worship, social custom, destructive traits, and salvific traits), integrative and progressive methods (spiritual striving, spiritual exercise, exemplary modeling, theoretical learning, and association with the righteous), and evaluation grounded in reflective and continuous self-introspection.

Third, Al-Ghazali's concept of moral education holds significant relevance to modern education at four key points of convergence, namely holistic educational goals, moral psychology, habituation methods, and teacher exemplarity. In addition, Al-Ghazali's emphasis on the spiritual-transcendental dimension offers a productive critique of a fundamental weakness of modern education, namely its tendency to separate the intellectual from the moral-spiritual dimension, although its implementation within the contemporary Indonesian education

system still faces structural challenges, particularly limited curriculum time and an assessment orientation still dominated by cognitive-academic achievement.

This study affirms that Al-Ghazali's thought on moral education is not merely a historical legacy, but a productive source of inspiration for developing an integrative model of moral education in the 21st century. PAI teachers and educators are advised to integrate the methods of mujadah, riyadhah, and uswah hasanah into daily moral learning. Curriculum developers are advised to consider strengthening the reflective evaluation dimension based on muhasabah as a complement to existing standardized evaluation systems. Future researchers, given that this study is a library-based study, are advised to conduct field research to empirically test the application of Al-Ghazali's concept of moral education in contemporary Islamic educational institutions.

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